

## **Colon Polyps**

### **What is a polyp?**

A polyp is a small growth on the lining of the intestine. Sometimes there is only one polyp, but there can be several present at the same time. There also are rare conditions in which the colon (large intestine) contains a very large number of polyps. Polyps may be either benign (non-cancerous) or malignant (cancerous).

### **Why are polyps removed?**

Removal is recommended for two reasons. First, in order to determine whether a polyp is benign or malignant, it is usually necessary for a pathologist to examine the tissue under a microscope. Second, most polyps, even though benign, have the potential to grow larger and become malignant if left in place. Removal of these polyps prevents them from becoming cancerous.

### **What are the alternatives to removing a polyp?**

Repeated evaluation of a polyp with X-rays or by looking at it directly with either a sigmoidoscope or a long, flexible colonoscope are the only other ways to determine whether the polyp is changing or growing larger. Unfortunately, because cancer develops at the microscopic level, these evaluations cannot reliably predict if a polyp is becoming malignant.

### **How are polyps removed?**

The tiniest polyps are removed by burning or cauterizing them. Larger polyps can usually be removed using a specially designed snare, which cuts the stalk of a polyp and cauterizes it at the same time, so that it does not bleed. The snare is passed through a channel in the colonoscope, when this technique is used.

### **Is surgery ever necessary to remove polyps?**

Occasionally this may be necessary. This may be because the stalk (or neck) of the polyp is too broad to permit safe removal by snare, or because the colon is positioned in such a way that the colonoscope will not reach the polyp area safely. The great majority of polyps can be removed without surgery.